

WHEN DID RELATIONSHIP REPLACE REPENTANCE AND FAITH?

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If 20th century thought has taught us anything, it has taught us that language matters. One merely has to respond to the colloquial inquiry, “How’s it going?” with “Groovy, man, groovy” and watch the response. Language creates, even as it refers. Language places us within a web of meaning that locates us within a particular people, at a particular time. Language opens the world to us according to the truthfulness of the language that has formed us. To hear the phrase, “Workers of the world, unite” reminds us that language places us within a particular tradition, presupposing an underlying narrative that both creates a polity even as that polity sustains the narrative through practices inherent within the narrative itself.

Shifts of language may indicate underlying shifts of socio-historical significance. Linguistic shifts may exhibit developments within a tradition as it attempts to resolve problems from within or engage new situations from without the tradition. Even more deeply, linguistic shifts may witness – and conceal -- profound ruptures that obscure deep political and ontological commitments. The full consequences of these shifts may not emerge for years or even centuries. Ontological assumptions and implications may remain buried invisibly within and continue to work long after the shift has occurred. Words carry bodies into a play of forces that create those bodies in their interaction with other bodies as they are formed to the reality that the language reveals.

Christian theology is primarily the linguistic pastoral work of repetition of the biblical narrative to sustain the on-going faithful witness of the church to the Triune God, an old/new language ever moving forward, ever looking backwards. As Philip Blonde writes,

the dialectic of repetition is easy, for that which is repeated has been –otherwise it could not be repeated – but the very fact that it has been makes the repetition into something new. . . The peculiar character of repetition lies rather in its affirmation of what has been and its orientation to what might be. The orientation and fidelity to what has been . . . corrects the pagan demand for the simply new. . . . As they have no anterior faith in what has preceded them, they can affirm nothing but the new as utterly new. This relationship to the new is therefore both violent and false, because each time the new arrives it loses its value the moment it is accepted. . . . the new conceived in this way demands the abasement and sacrifice of all that has previously been for the sake of what might be. (Philip Blonde, *Post-Secular Philosophy*, pp.19-20)

Pastoral proclamation must let the language of the church arise out of and fit coherently within the biblical narrative, the rule of faith, and thus serve God through sustaining the life of the church – particular congregations of the baptized. We preserve the Christian language from the violence of the endless repetition of the new and improved even as we return again and again to the sources for the ever new updating of the language. The pastoral task is to repeat the faith given to the saints, without rupturing this language by re-placing it into other narratives than the one God has sanctified in the Scriptures.

Pastoral work, understood within this perspective, is the primary locus of the working out of the language of the church, language about the One, True, Triune God and all things in relationship to this God. Theology, as Barth argues, does not properly belong to a pre-given philosophical system within the academy; it belongs to the church as proclamation. Theology as proclamation bears the mark of a tradition, of repetition. Because repetition always necessarily involves a new language in a new situation and language moves as we move in language, the church's proclamation has historically become prone to assimilation to narratives outside the Scriptures and politics outside the communion of saints.

It is here that theology as it has accidentally developed within the Christian academy may play an important role in serving the proclamation of the Church. Theology in this special sense serves the church's proclamation, not to make it more attractive or understandable, but to keep it true to subject in its own repetitions. Barth states:

The Church produces theology in this special and peculiar sense by subjecting itself to self-examination. It puts to itself the question of truth, i.e., it measures its action, its talk about God, against its being as the Church. Thus theology exists in this special and peculiar sense because before it and apart from it there is in the Church talk about God. Theology follows the talk of the Church to the extent that in its question as to the correctness of its utterance it does not measure it by the talk of the Church to the extent that it concretely reminds it that in all circumstances it is fallible human work which in the matter of relevance or irrelevance lies in the balance, and must be obedience to grace if it is to be well done. (Barth *Church Dogmatics* 1.1., p. 4).

Because proclamation is fallible human talk about God, theology as a second order discipline serves to evaluate the obedience of faith found in the church's proclamation.

Discontinuous language arising within the pastoral task needs interrogation, an assessment of the fittingness of the language within the story of God's redemption of all creation in Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit. This is the task of theology as a reflective enterprise. I would like to look at once recent discontinuity within basic Christian language within American evangelicalism: the re-placement of the language of "repentance and faith" with the language of "relationship" to describe the human side of initial justification. I would like to argue that this linguistic shift evidences a significant rupture in the repetition of the faith given to the saints. The language indicates an eclipsing of the biblical narrative as read through the rule of faith. It thus witnesses to a means of assimilating the church into contemporary society – the church becomes in and of the world. The language introduces incoherent and instability into the language of congregations and thus, ultimately will be a means of God's judgment on the church.

Repentance, Faith, and Initial Justification

The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church clearly articulates a common understanding of justification that may surprise American evangelicals. The Declaration states:

15. In faith we together hold the conviction that justification is the work of the triune God. The Father sent his Son into the world to save sinners. The foundation and

presupposition of justification is the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ. Justification thus means that Christ himself is our righteousness, in which we share through the Holy Spirit in accord with the will of the Father. Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works.

The Declaration rings with an evangelical tone, in the fullest sense of the term. It emphasizes the Christological center of justification, its wholly gracious, unmerited nature, and its reception in human faith, itself a gift of God.

The statement repeats the biblical language of justification and faith, ordering them in relationship to their center in Jesus Christ. It reminds one of John Wesley in his important sermon, *The Scripture Way of Salvation*: “Faith is the condition, and the only condition, of justification. It is the *condition*: no one is justified but he [or she] that believes: without faith no man [or woman] is justified. And it is the *only condition*: this alone is sufficient for justification. Every one that believes is justified, whatever else he has or has not. In other words: no man is justified till he believes; every man when he believes is justified. . . . faith is the only condition which is *immediately* and *proximately* necessary to justification” (CD III. 1, 3).

Wesley, as an important source of the evangelical tradition, emphasizes a previous step in the way of salvation not found in the Joint Declaration: repentance. Though not essential to justification, repentance normally precedes faith. Repentance is the appropriate human response to God’s revelation in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ: “all that Christ hath done and suffered for us, till He ‘poured out His soul for the transgressors.’” (SWS, I.3). Repentance for the unjustified normally, but not essentially, precedes justification. Wesley writes,

God does undoubtedly command us both to repent, and to bring forth fruits meet for repentance; which if we willingly neglect, we cannot reasonably expect to be justified at all; therefore both repentance, and fruits meet for repentance, are, in some sense, necessary to justification. But they are not necessary in the *same sense* with faith, nor in the *same degree*. Not in the *same degree*; for those fruits are only necessary *conditionally*; if there be time and opportunity for them. . . . Not in the *same sense*; for repentance and its fruits are only *remotely* necessary; necessary in order to faith; necessary in order to faith; whereas faith is *immediately* and *directly* necessary to justification” (SWS, III.2).

Wesley understands that in light of the justification, the pardon or forgiveness of sins offered by God the Father through Jesus Christ, the Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit, humans normally participate in justification through a movement that takes the person through repentance to faith on the way to a life of perfect love through the love of God shed abroad in the human heart. As Wesley famously summarized when speaking of his Methodists, “Our main doctrines, which include all the rest, are three, that of repentance, of faith, and of holiness. The first of these we account, as it were, the porch of religion; the next, the door; the third is religion itself” (Works, 9:227).

A word of caution is in order here. Repentance for Wesley does not mean a drop in self-esteem at the end of a campfire in the mountains. Repentance means a conviction of one's sin; if genuine, it is bodily visible in the 'fruits meet for repentance', "forgiving our brother, ceasing from evil, doing good, using the ordinance of God, and in general obeying him according to the measure of grace which we have received" (A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion). As Kenneth Collins notes, the "structural triad" of ceasing from evil, doing good, and using the ordinances of God – Scriptural ordered practices as fasting, searching the Scriptures, prayer, and receiving the Lord's Supper -- are the "same three elements as the principal rules to guide the [Methodist] societies. This fact demonstrates quite clearly that the very design and purpose of the Methodist societies was one of repentance, of preparing sinners to 'flee from the wrath to come'" (Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace*, p. 158). Repentance for Wesley involved a conviction of sin that led to the incorporation into a Methodist society that found its end in the Eucharistic worship of the church.

Of course, the Wesley's language of repentance, fruits meet for repentance, and faith in Jesus Christ was not original with him. The language appears throughout the New Testament: "The Kingdom of God is near: Repent and believe the Good News! (Mark 1:15). More than this, the language presupposes a certain underlying narrative concerning God, creation, and human life. Perhaps this is most evident in Wesley's sermon, Justification by Faith when he describes "the general ground of this whole doctrine of justification." The story begins with God's good creation and humanity made in God's image: "God made him to be an 'image of His own eternity,' an incorruptible picture of the God of glory" (I.1). Yet "man did disobey God. . . . for the moment he tasted that fruit, he died" (I.5). Thus, 'by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin. And so death passed upon all men,' as being contained in him who was the common father and representative of us all" (I.6). Wesley continues the story: "In this state we were, even all mankind, when 'God so loved the world, that he Gave His only begotten Son, to the end we might not perish, but have everlasting life" (I.7). Thus, "by the sacrifice for sin made by the second Adam, as the representative of us all, God is so far reconciled to all the world, that He hath given them a new covenant; the plain condition whereof being once fulfilled, 'there is no more condemnation' for us, but 'we are justified freely by His grace, through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ'" (I.9). The general ground of the doctrine of justification is the narrative of God's creation, human sin, and God's redemption in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ – of course, a brief summary of the biblical narrative.

This narrative grants intelligibility to the language of repentance and faith in Christ as the human perspective in participating in initial justification. Christ remains the focal point of the narrative, its center, the fulfillment of the problem introduced into God's creation through human disobedience. Repentance is necessary because of the disobedience that is sin, and the offense against God that results; the fruits of repentance necessary as one moves from stories of disobedience, life within this evil age (to wax Pauline), to the obedience of faith, the new age initiated in Christ and actualized as the already/not yet reality of the Church. All this is possible only because of Christ, in whom we see the obedience of faith in whom we participate through faith, "a divine *evidence* and *conviction* not only that 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself,' but also that Christ loved *me* and gave Himself for *me*" (SWS, II. 1). Through faith in Christ, one participates in the forgiveness that is God in Christ, drawn into the narrative of the Scriptures to witness to God's original intent for creation. Wesley's language arises from Scripture, not merely in its verbiage, but its underlying narrative deep structure that the language

presupposes. This is why Wesley’s language, and its underlying narrative structure, finds deep affinities with the language of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. They draw from a common source of Scripture as read within the Rule of Faith.

“Relationship” with God as the Ecclesial Product

Perhaps the Joint Declaration and Wesley’s language sounds vaguely, distantly familiar, like a Beatles song from Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Heart Band. One occasionally hears it played on the radio, but the Red Hot Chili Peppers, or God forbid, Hannah Montana, get more air time. The market has moved on. Repentance, faith in Christ, justification, and the narrative that sustains such language bear the musty smell of churchiness, a death knell in the competitive “religious free market” of maintaining and increasing one’s market share in an economy where it seems that religious recession always lurks just on the horizon.

More familiar to us is language like that found in Brian McLaren’s *Generous Orthodoxy*:

I am a Christian because I have confidence in Jesus Christ—in all his dimensions (those I know and those I don’t). I trust Jesus. I think Jesus is right because I believe God was in Jesus in an unprecedented way. *Through Jesus I have entered into a real, experiential relationship with God as Father, and I have received God’s Spirit into my life. . . . As I seek to follow Jesus as my leader, guide, and teacher, I believe I am experiencing life in its fullest dimensions—full of joy and love, and yes, full of struggle and challenge, too.* (emphasis mine, p. 69)

This is not to say that McLaren does not use the same language as Wesley at times. He writes, “We often refer to this saving judgment as God’s ‘convicting’ us of our sin and our need for repentance. Again, without it there is no true salvation. Forgiveness without conviction is not forgiveness: it is irresponsible toleration” (p. 95). Yet such language is not central for McLaren. McLaren’s assessment of Evangelicals is revealing: “Sure, I think Evangelicals have painted themselves into a lot of corners – theologically, politically, socially. But evangelical passion for spiritual experience, for spiritual understanding, for mission is precious” (p. 120). “A real experiential relationship with God,” an undefined “spiritual experience,” lies at the center of McLaren’s story.

Rick Warren’s use of similar language should not surprise us. Relational language fills the pages of *The Purpose Driven Life*. “Faith in Christ” language is not missing, though language of repentance and justification is absent, to my knowledge, from its passages. Warren summarizes the first purpose of human life: “The smile of God is the goal of your life” (p. 69). How do we bring this about? “This is what God wants most from you: a relationship! It’s the most astounding truth in the universe – that our Creator wants to fellowship with us. God made you to love you, and he longs for you to love him back” (p. 70). Warren ends a key chapter with a question, “Will you make pleasing God the goal of your life? There is nothing that God won’t do for the person totally absorbed with this goal” (p. 76).

“Relationship with God” provides Warren with the category in which to fit the various biblical stories: “In Eden we see God’s ideal relationship with us: Adam and Eve enjoyed an

intimate friendship with God. There were no rituals, ceremonies, or religion – just a simply loving relationship between God and the people he creative. . . . We were made to live in God’s continual presence, but after the Fall that ideal relationship was lost. Only a few people in Old Testament times had the privilege of friendship with God” (p. 85). “Then Jesus changed the situation . . . Unlike the Old Testament priests who had to spend hours preparing to meet him, we can now approach God anytime. The Bible says, “Now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God – all because of what our Lord Jesus Christ has done for us in making us friends of God” (NLT of Romans 5:3; p. 86). Thus, Warren is clear: “There is nothing— absolutely nothing – more important than developing a friendship with God. It’s a relationship that will last forever” (p. 99).

The church represents the opportunity to have eternal relationships with other human beings as well. Here “faith in Christ” enters into Warren’s language: The invitation to be part of God’s family is universal, but there is one condition: faith in Jesus . . . Your spiritual family is even more important than your physical family because it will last forever. . . . our spiritual family – our relationship to other believers – will continue throughout eternity” (p. 118). The Purpose Driven Life is an experience of relationships – with God and with others – that leads to an ever deeper, authentically meaningful life now because it will last into eternity.

As he often does, George Barna penetrates to the core of the centrality of the language of “relationship with God”. In his book, *Marketing the Church* (Navpress, 1988). Barna argues that marketing approaches help clarify a congregations task. What, then, is the product, that which is offered to consumers to satisfy an expressed or felt need: “The real product of the church is relationships. These relationships occur on two levels. The core relationship is that developed with Jesus Christ. A relationship with Jesus is the very essence of Christian ministry. The mission of the Church is to make believers of all people through a permanent, personal relationship with Jesus that is both life changing and life giving. Our relationship with God is made possible through our relationship with Jesus Christ.” The second level is relation with other human beings, that is, human interactions within the church. A congregation is a relationship distribution agency, much like Myspace or Twitter.

Lest we think that “relationship with God” has occupied a central place only within popular, best selling types of evangelical or post-evangelical thought and piety, we also find this category as central within American evangelical systematic theology: as the church prays, so it confesses. John Sanders in his work, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence*, writes,

Thinking of God as risk taker only makes sense within a particular theological model: a personal God who enters into genuine give-and-take relations with his creatures. Neither an impersonal deity nor a person deity who meticulously controls every event takes risks the portrait of God developed here is one according to which God sovereignly wills to have human persons become collaborators with him in achieving the divine project of mutual relations of love. Such an understanding of the divine-human relationship may be called ‘relational theism.’ By this I mean any model of the divine-human relationship that includes genuine give-and-take relations between God and humans such that there is receptivity and a degree of contingency in God. In give-and-take relationships God receives and does not merely give” (p. 12)

Language of the individual human “relationship with God” has moved to the central place in narrating what used to be narrated as justification through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. It has become a mediating language to translate older language into more relevant, readily accessible language. The older language still remains in the background, but relationship preempts its structural importance and overdetermines the older language when it rarely emerges.

If one attends closely to this language in relationship to the Christian Scriptures, several things become significant. “Relationship with God” is a language abstracted from the Christian Scriptures, not language found within the Scriptures themselves. Neither the Old Testament nor New Testament uses the language of “relationship with God” *per se*. The phrase “relationship with God” is a false biblicism given to language that has come to centrality in contemporary evangelical language. Such language is a historical innovation; the phrase is not used by Wesley or, to my knowledge, by the tradition, at least before the late 18th century. This does not make it necessarily wrong; it is the nature of repetition that is a tradition as in Nicea’s use of the term *homoousia* to provide a rule for reading Scriptures. Yet it should raise some eyebrows.

More seriously, relational language seems to rely upon an underlying narrative to render it intelligible that fundamentally eclipses the biblical narrative. Christian Smith has recently summarized this story in his *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford, 2005) as the “Creed” of contemporary theological convictions in America:

- (1) A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
- (2) God wants people to be good, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
- (3) The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
- (4) God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
- (5) Good people go to heaven when they die.”

The contemporary God of America is a God involved in give-and-take, a divine agent among similar human agents. Having created the individual, the individual, living in the deprivation outside the relationship, may enter relationship with this God as desired and need, for this God respects the autonomy, i.e., the freedom, of the individual. By entering relationship with God, the individual may find their true end in life by experiencing the fulfillment of their life in this relationship. In the Christian version of this story, the Scriptures are read as various characters seeking this relationship until God makes the relationship more readily available through Jesus. Jesus is a useful exemplar within this story – he becomes a reliable, open mean to an experience of relationship with God. Jesus is not the divine-human relationship himself without whom the whole story collapses. In the story that renders intelligibility to the relational language of Jesus represents, exemplifies and even makes available divine-human relationship for individual human beings (and even non-human realities) so that they might move from an unsatisfactory affective lot in life to a more satisfactory, even loving, affective condition. It is the story of an individual who moves from unfulfillment to fulfillment by their personal faith – now a work, the active reaching out to God. Such a story eclipses the biblical narrative.

Smith calls this contemporary American “religion” “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.” This is not a more “general” or “public” concept of god, but, as Smith recognizes, it is

a very particular kind of God: one who exists, created the world, and defines our general moral order, but not one who is particularly personally involved in one’s affairs God sometimes does get involved in people’s lives, but usually only when they call on him, mostly when they have some trouble or problem or bad feeling that they want resolved. In this sense, the Deism here is revised from its classical eighteenth-century version by the therapeutic qualifier, making the distant God selectively available for taking care of needs. (pp. 164-5)

Rather than a deistic god, we might call this revised Deism, “relational theism.” The replacement of “repentance, faith in Christ, and justification” language by “relationship with God” language seems to indicate a shift away from the biblical narrative, the communion of saints that has sustained it, and the practices which render it intelligible for those who live within and outside the biblical story. What lies behind this shift?

Relationship, Romanticism, and the Univocity of Being

The language of “relationship with God” as a functionally equivalent phrase for justification involves a deep shift in the grammar of the Christian faith. To re-narrate this full story goes far beyond our time, not to mention my expertise. The story involves deep cultural and ontological transitions within Western European culture as they worked themselves out and became indigenous to a North American setting in the Protestant United States. It is a story of the creation of religion as a unique inner experiential relationship to a transcendental ground of being within Romantic expressivist culture, a mediating position between the absolutely secular and the authority of traditional Christian orthodoxy. But before turning to this story, perhaps it may helpful to understand the logic inherent within the everyday use of the language of relationship, particularly as when such language involves God and the world.

The everyday use of the language of “relationship” in mainstream North American culture involves a type of affective “give-and-take” within the private sphere of our lives. The private realm spills over into our public life to support our endeavors. Oprah is the queen of “relationship” – a realm outside of reason that nonetheless deeply impacts the satisfaction that we experience in life. “Relationship” is not the realm of reason, but affection. “Relationship” belongs in the psychological, private, and therapeutic cultural realm. The language belongs in the realm of psychological “intimacy.” As Charles Taylor states, “We stand in a relation of intimacy with someone when there is a flow of feeling between us, when our barriers are down, and we can sense each other’s emotions” (Taylor, p. 137). We might speak that we know the local car mechanic; to say that we have “a relationship” with her, however, is to say something very different. A senior pastor should think twice before speaking of “having a relationship” with her Treasurer to her District Superintendent.

The rise of “relational” language in Christian pastoral language describes well what Phillip Rieff prophetically declared in 1966:

In the emergent culture, a wider range of people will have ‘spiritual’ concerns and engage in ‘spiritual’ pursuits. There will be more singing and more listening. People will continue to genuflect and read the Bible, which has long achieved the status of great literature; but no prophet will denounce the rich attire or stop the dancing. There will be more theater, not less, and no Puritan will denounce the stage and draw its curtains. On the contrary, I expect that modern society will mount psychodramas far more frequently than its ancestors mounted miracle plays, with patient-analysts acting out their inner lives, after which they could extemporize the final act as interpretation. . . .

The wisdom of the next social order, as I imagine it, would not reside in right doctrine, administered by the right men, who must be found, but rather in doctrines amounting to permission for each man to live an experimental life. (Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, p. 26)

The linguistic use of relationship places the life of believers and the church into a cultural sphere of the therapeutic.

Here we discover the impact of a deep cultural shift: the newly expressivist culture that has emerged in the last fifty years at least in the United States. Charles Taylor writes:

I believe, along with many others, that our North Atlantic civilization has been undergoing a cultural revolution in recent decades. The 60s provide perhaps the hinge moment, at least symbolically. It is . . . an individuating revolution, which may sound strange, because our modern age was already based on a certain individualism. But this has shifted on a new axis, without deserting the others. As well as moral/spiritual and instrumental individualisms, we now have a widespread ‘expressive’ individualism. This is, of course, not totally new. Expressivism was the invention of the Romantic period in the late eighteenth century. Intellectual and artistic elites have been searching for the authentic way of living or expressing themselves throughout the nineteenth century. What is new is that this kind of self-orientation seems to have become a mass phenomenon. (*A Secular Age*, p. 473).

The language of “relationship with God” mediates between the populist, evangelical tradition and this new expressivist order.

This expressivist order is not ontologically neutral. “Christianity is not a religion; it is a relationship”, a common evangelical mantra goes. Yet relational language depends upon the ontology from Romanticism in which Christian discourse shifts from one about God to one about “religion.” “Relationship” in its expressivist sense demands a deep commonality in affective agency. One may have a fetish for a screwdriver; one does not have a “relationship” with it. A “relationship with God” demands an ontology in which God and humanity shares sufficient commonality in being to have an affectivity that humans may experiences.

Charles Taylor in his *Sources of the Self* argues that “the picture of nature as a source was a crucial part of the conceptual armoury in which Romanticism arose and conquered European culture and sensibility” (p. 368). Romanticism moved nature as source to an experience within the individual. Nature communicates from within the human, “an inner impulse or conviction

which tells us of the importance of our own natural fulfillment and of solidarity with our fellow creatures in theirs” (pp. 369-70). As God becomes Nature and Nature God, as argued by Spinoza, humans discover a common element in “diverse expressions of piety” – “the consciousness of being absolutely dependent, or which is the same thing, being in relation with God” (Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, proposition 4; p. 12). Schleiermacher thus speaks a paean of praise to Spinoza in his *On Religion*:

Offer with me reverently a tribute to the manes of the holy, rejected Spinoza. The high World-Spirit pervaded him; the Infinite was his beginning and his end; the Universe was his only and his everlasting love. In holy innocence and in deep humility he beheld himself mirrored in its most worthy mirror. He was full of religion, full of the Holy Spirit. Whereof, he stands there alone and unequalled; master in his art, yet without disciples and without citizenship, sublime above the profane tribe” (Speech 2, p. 40).

God and humanity, God and nature, the Infinite and the Finite, the Absolute and the Contingent, must all belong within a common category of being in order for humanity to experience a “relationship with God.” Under this dualism lies a deeper monism. As Conor Cunningham in *Genealogy of Nihilism* states, such a dualism “collapses into a monism as each dualism resides within a symbiotic unicity; a unity which is at times named, alluded to or ignored” (p. 236). Relationship with God ultimately pulls God into an ontology of immanence, in which God becomes the “depth dimension” of that which is.

If this analysis is accurate, we discover an interesting irony. Evangelical language of “relationship with God” finds its origins within the founding matrix of Protestant liberalism. Protestant liberalism originated within the attempts to pull “the very class that have raised themselves above the vulgar” (Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, p. 1) back into the church by translating the Christian faith into categories drawn from romanticism.

Within such a conceptual scheme, “Orthodoxy is believable, for those who believe it, ultimately as the best interpretation of this voice or élan” (Taylor, *Sources*, p. 371). Yet the faith given to the saints is extremely unstable with these presuppositions. As Taylor states, “a slide to a kind of pantheism [or panentheism] is all too easy, and this we see in the Romantic generation with the early Schelling, for instance, and later in another form with Hegel. This slide can go further and take us outside of properly Christian forms” (p. 371). Similarly, Gary Dorrien documents how in the United States, Unitarians began as a “religious alternative to the tottering remains of Puritan orthodoxy” (*The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805-1900*, p 5). As the movement aged, it absorbed romantic presuppositions more deeply within it. Dorrien’s words are telling: “Liberal Christianity seemed to have gone too far; there had to be a line that guarded the liberal church from anything-goes-relativism. Unitarians would not survive – or at least not flourish – as a humanistic fellowship of liberal Christians and non-Christian ethical humanists and naturalists. . . . The Unitarian conference retained its minimal tie to the faith of historic Christianity, but in a way that marginalized the faith language of Christ as Lord and Savior” (pp. 108-09).

Post-WW II American consumer capitalist culture was both formed by and has promoted the expressivist cultural with its roots in Romanticism. Evangelicalism, always highly sensitive to market dynamics, has and still is slowly moving into the same unstable theological categories

of those provided by modernist forms of Christianity. The movement from the language of repentance, faith, and justification to relationship with God, well-intentioned as it is, witnesses to deeper historical shifts in the grammar of the Christian faith itself. One wonders whether the assimilated evangelicals given to “relational theism” will share the fate of the Unitarians in the years ahead.

Conclusion

Pastoral language is hard work. Congregations live in a linguistic world that presents itself as natural and inevitable. Even the language that we use to invite unbelievers into the faith may have profound consequences, not only for the individual and the present congregation, but for generations to come within particular congregations, regions, and even beyond. Theological language used in one generation and even in one congregation can have impact long after and far beyond that particular time and place often in ways very hard to trace, except from a broader perspective.

Pastoral formation in this culture takes intense faith and intense intellectual work in order to serve God through holy orders in their specific congregations. Mastering management techniques is essential in this cultural environment; but we must subordinate and order these techniques to the greater end of proper repetition of the faith given to the saints. Pastors, not professional theologians in Christian universities or seminaries, are the primary theologians in whom God has entrusted the gospel. Within the voluntaristic, free-market environment of contemporary United States, pastors must learn to engage this environment fully, but not surrender to it. We must master the skills of moving persons into the biblical narrative through repentance and faith in Christ rather than eclipse the biblical narrative.

Perhaps a good place to start is remembering that speaking of God is delicate and difficult business. Our main danger is not irrelevance, but idolatry. We know God as One Unknown in this life, except as God has revealed God’s Triune Self in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit as witnessed to in Scriptures. This knowledge comes to us by the power of the Holy Spirit, whom takes us to the Father through the Son. We can only receive such justification in faith and hope that rises to love.